



## **Podcast Transcript, September 2023 Sexual Grief: Understanding, Processing, and Healing**

Presented by Mo, Advocacy Specialist, and Aspen, Survivor Advocate I

**Episode Description:** *Grief can impact all aspects of our lives, including our sexuality. For survivors of domestic or sexual violence, these feelings can sometimes be especially complex or painful. Join Aspen and Mo as they define the concept of sexual grief, offer ways to talk about it, and move forward through a lens of sex positivity and healing.*

**ASPEN:** Hello and welcome to the Women's Center's CONVO, a podcast hub that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members and service providers alike. CONVO stands for Creating Opportunities for Non-Violent Outcomes, and we invite you to learn more about this initiative on Instagram at [@convo\\_twc](#).

The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on a healing topic.

Today, our topic is **Sexual Grief: Understanding, Processing, and Healing**.

**MO:** Before we begin, it's important to issue a content warning. While we will not be sharing specific examples of sexual trauma, we will be discussing the concept of surviving sexual trauma. This topic may bring up difficult thoughts, feelings, and experiences. **These are valid, and we want you to take care of you.**

A transcript of this podcast is available on our website if you would like to preview the discussion or follow along, and Advocates are always available each day on our **24-Hour Hotline, 262.542.3828**, for additional support and resources. Healing is like exercising a muscle; it may be uncomfortable or difficult at times, but if it starts to hurt or feel unsafe, please give your mind and body a break.

**ASPEN:** Grief impacts sex, and sex impacts grief. We've mentioned grief in previous episodes and have talked about it during our **Wednesday Workshop** support group, and the general consensus about grief is that... it's complicated. Something true about

all forms of grief, however, is that there is not one way to feel nor one way that it manifests.

The way that grief impacts our sexuality, or experiencing grief related to a sexual experience or relationship, can especially be difficult for survivors. Sexual grief can be related to a specific sexually traumatic experience, or even as a part of a larger sense of relationship-related grief. There are four main ways we've identified that this can manifest, which Mo will discuss next.

**MO:** The first point is a sense of disenfranchised grief, or grief that isn't usually acknowledged or accepted within social norms, over a past abusive relationship. We could talk for hours on this topic alone (and perhaps we will in the future), but it's a normal and common response for survivors to miss aspects of the relationship or the abuser, typically those good moments that began the relationship or crept up in between moments of tension or pain. It's not uncommon to grieve pleasant sexual interactions with an abuser or even to become aroused—this does not make you dirty or broken, nor does it mean you truly want to rekindle the relationship—this is simply how most bodies respond to sexual stimuli.

Two other ways that sexual grief can manifest are again aided by social norms. We live in a bit of a confusing culture, to say the least, as it is one that both stigmatizes and glorifies sexuality. If you have not been intimate with anyone in a while (or if you simply don't want to be), our culture may suggest that there is something wrong with you; on the flip side, if you have been more intimate lately (either with other people or on your own), our culture may criticize your choices and question your trauma. It can seem like a losing battle. Moreover, hearing about current events related to sexual abuse or seeing depictions in media can be triggering for survivors, especially within a culture that can sometimes glorify sexual violence in itself. This is hard stuff, and we don't often find space to process these feelings, but I can promise you that you are not broken.

Lastly, body changes can certainly bring about feelings of sexual grief, or even triggers and flashbacks to past sexual trauma. All forms of abuse involve someone taking power and control away from another person, and sexual abuse in particular involves taking that sense of power and control away from the most intimate parts of ourselves. Changes like menopause, gender dysphoria, weight fluctuations, even undergoing medical procedures can be difficult for survivors dealing with sexual grief, and it's not uncommon for this grief to turn inwards, affecting self-image.

**ASPEN:** We'll talk later on about reclaiming our bodies and sense of self, but again, these responses are all common for survivors, there is nothing wrong with you, and you do deserve to heal and feel safe within your body again.

When we discussed this topic in our Wednesday Workshop group, we shared a video by sex educator **Cassandra Corrado**. She has a wealth of healthy sexuality and healing resources on her website; we will link that, the video we shared, and some affirmations

for survivors looking to heal their sense of sexuality on our website alongside this transcript.

An activity that was shared in the video was titled, “**Being Pleasurably Present,**” and we would like to guide you through this activity. You are welcome to pause the podcast at the end of each question to give yourself reflection time, follow along on our transcripts, or to use the video guide from Cassandra Corrado: whatever works best for you!

Being pleasurably present means that you feel like you are able to be in the current moment, grounded, and fully able to experience joy. Are there moments where you feel this way, spaces you feel grounded, activities that bring you that joy? These do not need to be anything sexual, one example may be writing poetry. Take a moment to reflect on them, perhaps write them down if you feel inclined. Are you able to identify any elements that help you feel comfortable doing these activities, like music or lighting? Are there any comfort items that help you ground yourself within these activities, a time of day, a specific environment in which you feel safest with these activities? It’s okay to experiment with these elements if you aren’t sure, and it’s okay if you don’t have a preference either. Using the poetry example, perhaps you may be most pleasurably present writing poetry in a cozy corner of your bedroom, using light from a window or soft lamp, curled up in a warm blanket with quiet instrumental music in the background.

The next step of this activity is of course optional, but if you are looking to reclaim your sense of sexuality, this can be a helpful tool. Are there any aspects of this activity that can be translated into the sexual realm? Continuing the example, would you find power in writing with more sensual themes, whether exploring self-love or interpersonal connection? Could the environment you’ve created to write poetry be recreated the next time you engage with your sexuality? What grounds us in one environment can oftentimes carry over into others, and if you feel safe to do so, this could help bridge those relaxing feelings back into your sex life. Like all forms of healing, reclaiming sex is not linear, and it is important to take your time and be gentle with yourself.

**MO:** So, is it actually possible to have healthy sex after experiencing sexual grief? The answer is a resounding **yes!** Speaking of resounding yesses, let’s have a brief refresher of the concept of affirmative consent. There is a podcast about this in our archives, and we will link this to this episode as well—so many resources to explore! **Affirmative consent** is the notion that “only yes means yes” in the context of sexual consent, meaning that consent only exists if all parties are free to give consent and can reverse it at any time, are informed, are enthusiastic about the sexual activity, and everyone knows what specifically is being consented to. Anything but this is a no, even if someone doesn’t explicitly say “no.” You have the right to your body, your sexuality, and to be respected during all sexual encounters at all times.

One way that consent can be communicated (and reversed) is the use of safe words, which is something we recommend to everyone, particularly survivors who may be

concerned about setting boundaries in the bedroom. Safe words are words or phrases that are agreed upon prior to engaging in sexual scenarios that are used to communicate to our partner(s) that we need to stop and/or check in about what's happening in that moment. It can be a single word or phrase that stops everything, or even a system of multiple words that can indicate different needs. For example, some people use what's called the "traffic light system;" saying red means you would like to stop the activity entirely, yellow means you'd like to pause and check in, and green means you are feeling good to go! Safe words can be any word or phrase that is easy for you and partners to remember and listen for, and they're most helpful as words that wouldn't regularly come up during your sexual encounters. Safe words can also be used in many other scenarios outside of sexual contexts too, like if you find yourself struggling to ask for help when you are triggered or overwhelmed, or they could be part of a safety plan to alert supports to check in with you or to send help your way.

Again, while these can be a tool to communicate parts of consent, safe words are not replacements for consent—**that yes still needs to be present for any and all sexual activity!** We recommend listening to our past podcast and reading the attached infographic to learn more about affirmative consent.

**ASPEN:** You deserve a good and healthy relationship with sexuality that feels safe and empowering. It is possible to rebuild this connection to yourself, to remove any shame you may feel in spite of a culture that may not always hold space for your grief, and to feel fully in control of your life and your experiences. Healing sexuality isn't something to "rip the band-aid" off in order to heal "correctly," you can take your time and be gentle with yourself as much as you need. You are retraining your brain that you have control and are safe! This takes time, patience, and attention.

Similar to the activity I talked through earlier, some people may find it helpful to rebuild their relationship with positive, non-sexual touch or activities before moving into their sexuality. Positive, non-sexual touch can look like: brushing your hair, finding soft textures to rub on your skin, booking a massage, or accepting a hug from a trusted support person or even a household pet.

As you begin to feel comfortable experiencing safe touch, you may choose to explore what sexual self-touch feels like for you, and relearn what does and doesn't feel enjoyable. This may be different than before, and that's totally normal and okay! If this seems intimidating, you can try setting a timer to eliminate the pressure the keep going if you don't want to, or you can keep going when the timer goes off if you're feeling good!

At this point, some people have asked us if they should or have to disclose their trauma to potential sexual partners. Like any time you share your story, you always have the right to choose how much or how little, if any, you share about your trauma history. Like Mo said, sex requires affirmative consent — **you are never obligated to do or share anything you aren't comfortable with.** If you feel safe to do so, giving a potential partner a heads up can prepare them to support you; this can give insight as to how they might respond if a triggered reaction does occur. It's okay if you feel like having more

conversations about it prior to beginning a sexual relationship, or if you continue to revisit these conversations as your relationship progresses. A healthy partner will respect your experiences and help make sure that you feel safe; if you feel like they don't seem to care about your story or are rushing you to feel comfortable with certain activities, they very likely are not a safe partner and it is okay to stop seeing them. Know that if you do choose to disclose, you don't have to share all of the details—you can be vague, you can type it out and have them read it, whatever feels safest! We say this all the time, but we do mean it: your voice has power, and it deserves to be heard. Healing in all forms is not linear, but you do deserve to heal and thrive after abuse. We also want to reiterate that it is perfectly okay if your healing journey does not involve sexuality or sexual activities. How you heal within your body and your mind is always your decision.

**MO:** Thank you for listening to this episode! If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org), and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking Resources, then Podcasts on our website. Stay tuned to our website for future episodes, and feel free to take a look at our past episodes too.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth.

We believe that it is important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we are also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we are not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement; we all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you're in the Greater Milwaukee area, we also host an in-person Wednesday Workshop on the second and fourth Wednesdays of every month. That is by pre-registration only, so please call the Hotline and ask to speak with one of us for more information.

Thank you so much for listening, and be well.